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ABSTRACT

Coordination of roles of academic departments, evaluation units, and institutional planning units is advocated as an effective approach to evaluating educational program and student performance outcomes. A model to effect this coordination is described in terms of purposes, characteristics, and structure. In the process model, four guideposts, each with categories of activities, are described to identify critical stages in the coordination: (1) listening/clarification; (2) consultation/planning, including pilot/review; (3) implementation; and (4) interpretation of findings, which leads back into listening/clarification. It is claimed that application of the model can foster development of continuous evaluation procedures and long-range evaluation planning as well as incorporation of evaluation results in academic administrative decision-making. In addition, effects of the application of the model are claimed to act as deterrents to or correctives of tendencies toward "status quo" bias. (SW)

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Coordination of Roles of Academic Departments, Evaluation Units, and Institutional Planning Units in Evaluating Educational Program and Student Performance Outcomes[1]

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Abstract

Evaluation studies of educational program and student performance outcomes can be more effectively inaugurated and implemented when evaluation roles of academic departments, evaluation units, and institutional planning units are coordinated. A model, suggested to order such coordination, is described by purpose, characteristics, and structure. Application of the model can foster development of continuous evaluation procedures and long range evaluation planning as well as incorporation of evaluation results in academic and administrative decision making. In addition, effects of the application of the model can act as deterrents to or correctives of tendencies toward "status quo" bias.

1. Introduction

Need for evaluation. Institutions of higher education are finding it necessary to consider implementation of a variety of evaluative research efforts to match the multiplicity of requests for objective data related to educational program and student performance outcomes[2]. Demands for accountability by out-

[1] Based on a paper presented at the Fourth General Conference of the IMHE Programme "Managing the Universities in the 80's," Office of Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, September 1978.

[2] Evaluative research "...is a specific form of applied research whose primary goal is not the discovery of knowledge but...a testing of the application of knowledge." It involves a process of "...stating objectives in terms of ultimate, intermediate, or immediate goals, of examining the underlying assumptions, and of setting up criteria of effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency, and process"(Suchman, 1967, pp. 75 & 71).

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side institutions and agencies and by individuals have increased. For example, greater government financial support of higher education programs requires a concomitant increase in outcomes data related to stated program goals. Individuals and groups, more aware of and more involved in higher education, request specific information about programs offered by higher education institutions, e.g., a statement of what a student is to be able to know and do as a result of a given educational experience (Young, 1976). Validation studies are basic to educational programs and requirements in which performance level on a group test is the criterion of success, e.g., competency standards which are included in degree requirements (McClung, 1977).

As institutions broaden services offered, internal demands on institutional resources increase. Decision making related to intra-institutional resource allocation can be more effective if the academic and administrative policy and planning have a basis in objective data. For example, trends indicate activities of higher education institutions are expanding with the result that, in addition to the traditional fulltime instruction and research, adult students are served in quality programs designed to meet their needs (Burkett, 1977). The curriculum developments and administrative strategies implied by these trends require monitoring by evaluation studies designed to provide data for program review and amendment. New access curriculum models, which emphasize education for each rather than for all, are designed to use flexible modes for learning traditional curriculum. Continuing and systematic assessment of individual student performance is an integral part of programs developed from these models (Cross, 1976).

Conceptualizing evaluation. Evaluation frameworks and models to use as general guides in developing program evaluation strategies are available. For example, Gardner (1977) describes distinguishing characteristics, assumptions, principle

advantages and disadvantages for five frameworks: professional judgment, measurement, standards of performance, decision oriented, and goal free/responsive. House (1978) examines underlying assumptions and typical research questions asked for eight evaluation models, namely, systems analysis, behavioral objectives, decision making, goal free, art criticism, accreditation, adversary, and transaction.

Irrespective of the evaluation framework or model selected, the validity of the procedures used--and, therefore, of the evaluation effort--rests on the accuracy and precision with which educational program aims and conditions of implementation or with which desired student performance outcomes are conceptualized in relation to the need for the evaluation, the questions it addresses, personnel and budget resources available for the evaluation, time limits, and policy constraints. This task of goal specification implies a coordinated effort by academic departments, evaluation units, and institutional planning units; an effort which has not been the general practice. The lack of coordination has been noted frequently at the crucial point of defining program and student outcome objectives in behavioral terms accessible to evaluation (Young, 1976).

Establishment and maintenance of a viable system of coordination is not simple, especially given the tendency for needs of individuals or groups within an institution to displace institutional goals. However, coordination efforts can have a better chance of working if a major focus is agreement on a specification of general purposes and goals descriptive of educational program and student performance outcomes rather than on detailed sets of specific objectives (Ebel, 1973). Need for agreement on general goals and objectives is crucial and holds no matter how the evaluation task is conceptualized: for example, the qualitative and quantitative characteristics descrip-

tive of institutional performance can be viewed as three separate categories of tasks, i.e., quantitative accountability, qualitative evaluation and maintenance, and public justification (Olscamp, 1978). Or, another approach considers evaluation as a three level process with within-level options: (1) formative or summative purpose, (2) internal or external responsibility, and (3) fulfilling a service or an accountability function (Cranton & Legge, 1978). Further, different academic departments appear to have different effects on student performance (Hartnett & Centra, 1977). Accurate incorporation of educational program variables or students outcome variables in the evaluation procedures seems to require, therefore, continuing input from educational program specialists.

"Status quo" bias. When academic discipline specialists are involved in the evaluation of educational programs within their jurisdictions the issue of "status quo" bias becomes a focal point of concern (Cochran, 1978). "Status quo" bias, while it can be identified readily in visible behaviors, can exercise its most subtle effects in the experimental design sense as unrecognized distortion in an aspect of evaluation (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Evaluation and "status quo" bias tend to pull in different directions: the former toward change, questioning, and studying relations between goals and objectives and action; the latter, toward stability, commitment, and the relations of current programs to the existing structure and participants.

However, as Wildavsky (1972) points out, the ability to carry out evaluation tasks depends on an institutional environment in which the evaluation process can be trusted. That is, an environment in which the evaluation activity is known to be carried out in order to implement better policies and programs and not to support a predetermined course of action. Intra-institutional acceptability of evaluation efforts can be strengthened by involving in the

evaluation activities persons knowledgeable about the educational program and student performance outcomes under study and, in data interpretation, by stating clearly the outcomes of existing practices and the likely outcomes if recommended changes are effected.

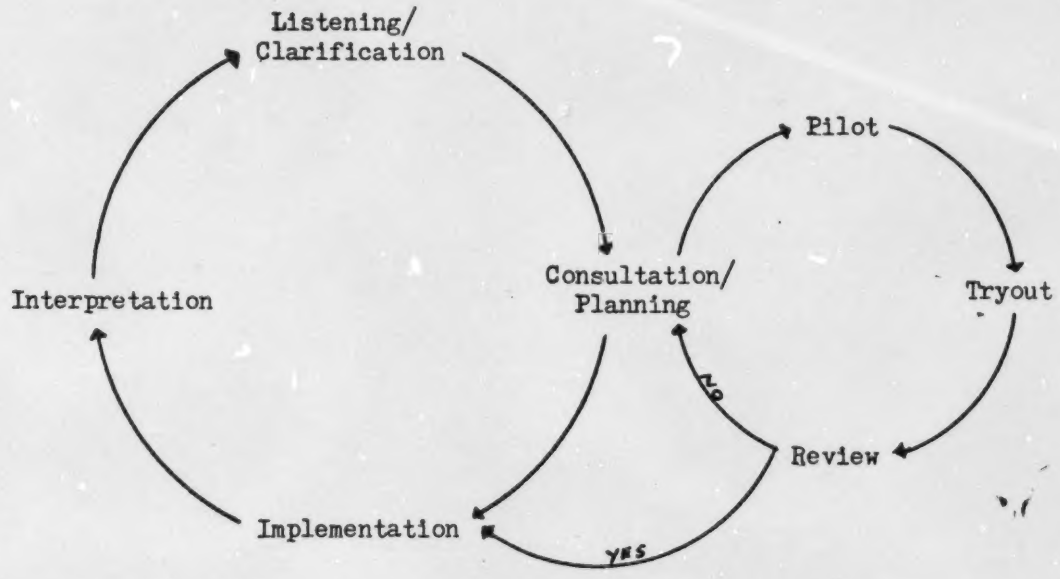
2. Process Model

Purpose. The model (see Figure 1, p. 6) represents an attempt to describe a structure which can be used to guide the process of establishing and maintaining coordinated efforts in planning, implementing, and interpreting evaluation activities related to educational program and student performance outcomes.

The model is the outgrowth of a series of different types of evaluation tasks carried out at one institution (Cantwell, 1977; 1978). These activities indicate that systematic coordination of evaluation efforts can assist the development of continuous evaluation procedures and long range evaluation planning, abet clear data interpretation and use of the results of evaluation efforts, foster recognition of needs of institutional units affected by the evaluation processes, and make the administration and budgeting of evaluation simpler. Systematic coordination of evaluation activities also appears to act as a deterrent or corrective to "status quo" bias as it provides an opportunity for the development of an environment in which evaluation can be understood and accepted.

Characteristics. Four general categories can be used to summarize the many tasks which need to be completed in evaluation of educational program or student performance outcomes. That is, for any evaluation it is necessary to (1) develop a plan for assessment of outcomes; (2) design specific studies, related to the desired educational goals and student outcomes, which fall within the framework of objectives and criteria of the plan; (3) carry-out planned designs; and (4) report findings in an understandable and usable form and related to the

Figure 1. Process Model for Structuring Evaluation Tasks

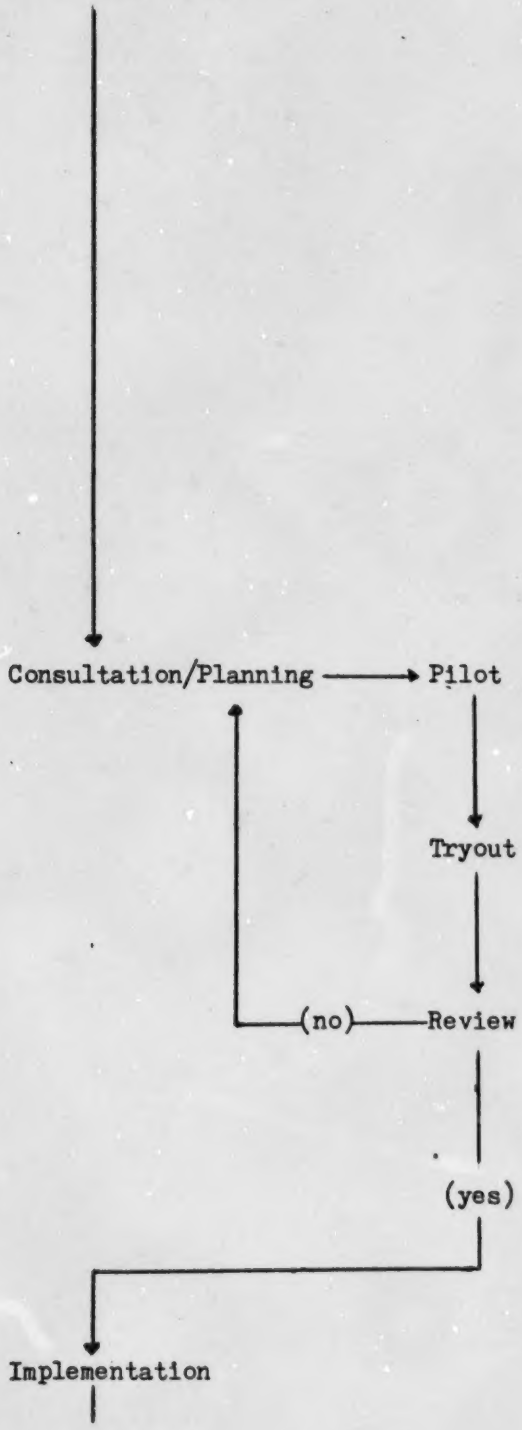


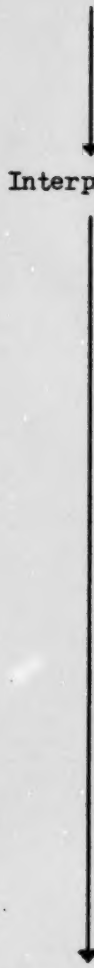
questions which led to the evaluation procedures.

The process model suggested represents a structure under which the efforts of an evaluation group of representatives from academic departments, evaluation units, and institutional planning units can be coordinated as they work on each of the four evaluation tasks. In the model, guideposts, each with categories of activities, are described to identify critical stages in the coordination process. The four guideposts are: (1) Listening/Clarification; (2) Consultation/Planning, with a branch into Pilot/Review until the design is ready for (3) Implementation; and (4) Interpretation of findings which leads back into Listening/Clarification, which includes review, amendment, and continuation of the evaluation procedure. The model, as a structure, is independent of research or evaluation design. Specific procedures and styles selected to complete an evaluation are unique to individual institutions and dependent on institutional resources and environments.

Activities. Examples of the types of activities falling under each guidepost

in the structure follow.


Guidepost
Activity
Listening/Clarification
1. Initial discussions; clarification of objectives and needs for evaluation; essentially a blending of three sets of objectives, namely, those of the academic department, evaluation unit, and institutional planning unit.
2. Understanding program goals and objectives basic to the educational program or student performance outcomes being evaluated.
3. Translating goals and objectives into program statements.
Consultation/Planning
Pilot
1. Defining the specific problem(s) and identifying problem parts.
2. Generating a variety of solutions and solution components for the problem(s).
Tryout
3. Specifying dependent and independent variables and techniques for measuring them.
(no)
Review
4. Testing out a variety of problem solutions.
(yes)
5. Accepting a final design for problem solution.
Implementation
1. Application of accepted design in



practice.

2. Monitoring and completing design tasks.

Interpretation

1. Dissemination of results of study in understandable and usable form related to goals and objectives identified in Listening/Clarification.

2. Recommendations for action; related to findings and goals and objectives; statement of outcomes under present conditions and projected outcomes if recommended changes followed.

3. Review of results and of evaluation processes and procedures to provide material for reassessment of the evaluation process before moving to the next sequence:

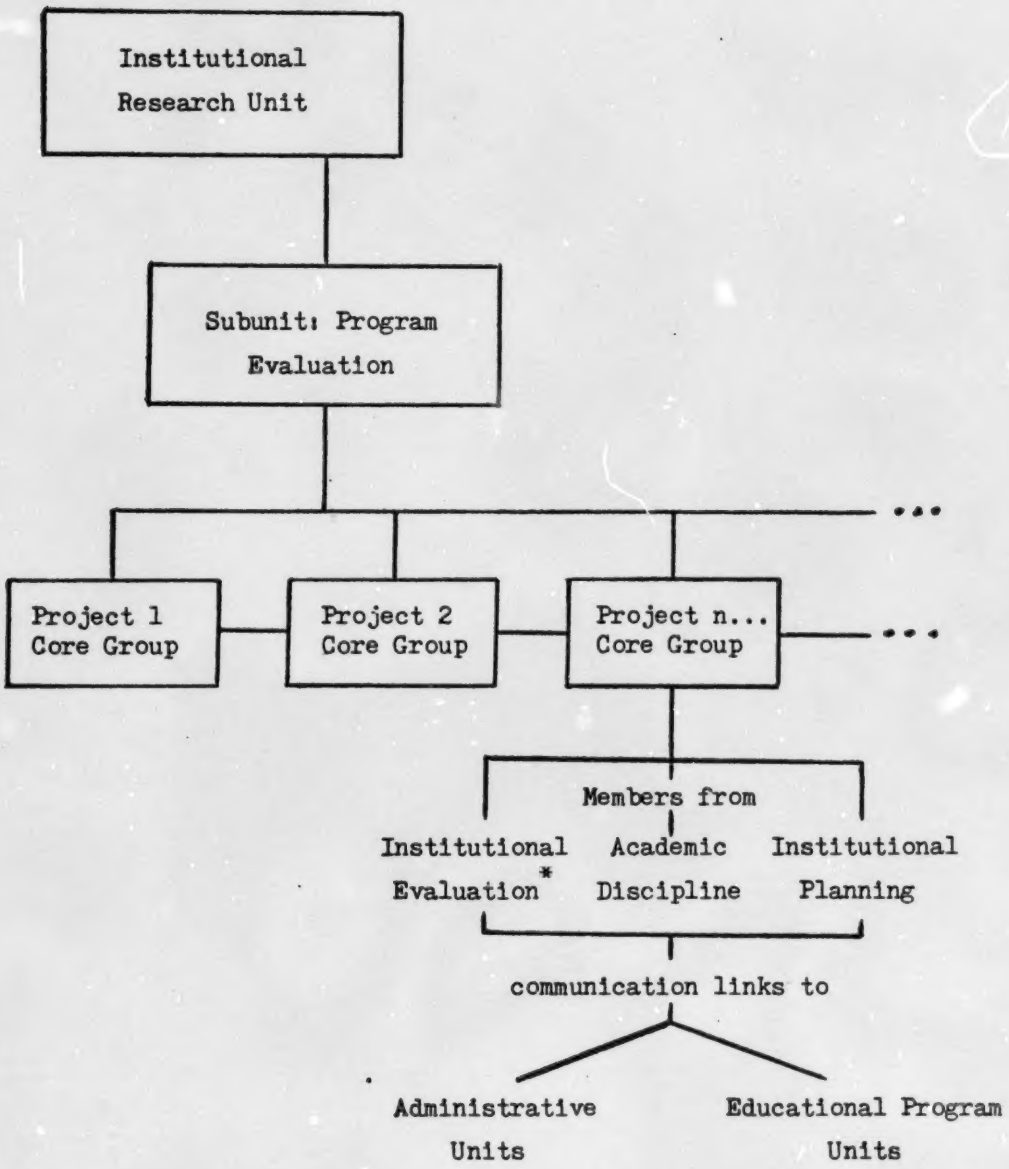
Listening/Clarification

1. Reassessment of evaluation process . . . .

Organization and Personnel. The structure and staffing implied in the model can fit into an institutional research organizational framework. A simple framework is presented by way of an example (see Figure 2, p. 9).

Evaluation project core groups, small units which include representatives from academic departments, evaluation, and institutional planning, assume the tasks of developing and carrying through evaluation research needs under the direction of the evaluation member, a staff member of the institutional research unit. The core groups are open to seek and receive input on the

Figure 2. Organization and Communication Links



*Director of Project Core Group

evaluation activities from individuals within and without the institution. Evaluation core group members assume responsibility for maintaining open communication links between the group and concerned institutional units, e.g., academic department(s), institutional evaluation, and institutional policy and planning.

3. Conclusion

The process model which has been presented describes a structure of four guideposts which can be applied at each category of evaluation task for the purpose of establishing and maintaining coordinated efforts among academic department, evaluation unit, and institutional planning and policy unit in inaugurating and implementing studies of educational program and student performance outcomes. Application of the structure can foster the development of continuous evaluation procedures and long range evaluation planning, with concomitant advantages in the administration of and budgeting for evaluation activities. Further, application assists in communication of useful interpretations of findings and makes simpler the incorporation of these evaluation findings in academic and administrative decision making. In coordinated evaluation efforts the needs of institutional units affected by evaluation procedures are addressed. "Status quo" bias is less likely to invalidate evaluation efforts under conditions of coordinated evaluation.

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